

**A NEWLY DISCOVERED PORTRAIT OF AMERIGO VESPUCCI.**

A discovery has just been made in Florence which is of the greatest importance from an historical point of view. There has been no artistic sensation in Florence of late years, with the possible exception of the finding of Botticelli's "Pallas" in 1895, which can be compared with the discovery on February 3 of a portrait of Amerigo Vespucci in an altar piece by Ghirlandajo in the Ognissanti Church at Florence. We are enabled to present probably the first photographic reproduction of this portrait which has appeared in this country, the negatives having just been made by the Fratelli Alinari, of Florence. Special attention has recently been paid to Vespucci, owing to the approaching celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of his alleged voyage.

That Domenico Ghirlandajo painted a fresco for the Vespucci family has long been known. Vasari says: "Over an arch in the same chapel there is a *Misericordia* wherein Domenico (Ghirlandajo) has portrayed the likeness of Amerigo Vespucci, who sailed to the Indies" (*che fece le navigazioni dell' Indie*). Bocchi, in his guide book to Florence (*Le Bellezze della Città di Fiorenza*, 1591), says: "In an arch in which is painted a '*Misericordia*' by the hand of Domenico there is likewise the portrait of Amerigo Vespucci." The painting was never lost in the strict acceptance of the word, for we have the testimony of Vasari and Bocchi that it existed, and we know that the Vespucci chapel was whitewashed in 1616, but some time ago the walls of this chapel were scraped and no fresco was found. It now seems, however, that there were two Vespucci chapels in the Ognissanti Church and that the better known of these in 1616 passed to another family, when the walls were whitewashed. It is nothing unusual for families to have two chapels in a single church, as, for example, the two Strozzi chapels in Santa Maria Novella in Florence, but the existence of two such chapels is apt to make confusion in documents, so that it is, therefore, not surprising that the mistake occurred.

The picture was looked for in other parts of the church, but the investigators were misled by Vasari's words "over an arch," while in reality it was under an arch. Padre R. Razzoli, of the Franciscan Order of *Minori Osservanti* and historian of the Ognissanti, informed Signor Guido Carocci, the inspector of monuments, that he had found in some old documents in his convent the statement that there were frescoes under certain pictures in the chapel of St. Elizabeth, Queen of Portugal.

On February 3, Matteo Rosselli's canvas of St. Elizabeth was removed and behind it was found the long lost Ghirlandajo. It seems that one of the altars in the chapel was set up by the Vespucci family. Like so many altar pieces it is in two parts, the lower representing the dead Christ and in the curved *lunette* under the arch is a standing figure of the Virgin Mary, the Lady of Mercy, "*Misericordia*," whose ample mantle, supported by angels, surrounds the members of the Vespucci family, while with her outstretched arms she pronounces a benediction on the kneeling figures. She stands on a dais on which are the words "*Misericordia Domini plena est terra*." Six women kneel on her left and six men on her right. Kneeling next the Virgin among the latter is the figure of a young man who presents a three-quarter face view. This head has been identified as that of Amerigo Vespucci, from whom we derive our name of "America," and it is

marked by such intelligence that it seems to presage his future greatness. Next him is the head of Amerigo the Elder, grandfather of the navigator. The ecclesiastic is an uncle of Amerigo and was a friend of Savonarola. The rest of the figures are believed to be members of the Vespucci family. The mother of Amerigo is the central figure on the other side. The figures are about



AMERIGO VESPUCCI IN GHIRLANDAJO'S RECENTLY DISCOVERED FRESCO.

two-thirds life size. There is nothing strange in the introduction of family portraits in altar pieces. It was the universal custom at that time to include the members of one's own family as taking part, usually as spectators, in representations of great scenes of the Christian faith. It has been suggested that the dead Christ in the lower part of the fresco is the work of Davide Ghirlandajo, the brother of Domenico, as it is not so well executed as the *lunette*.

The authenticity of the portrait seems to be settled

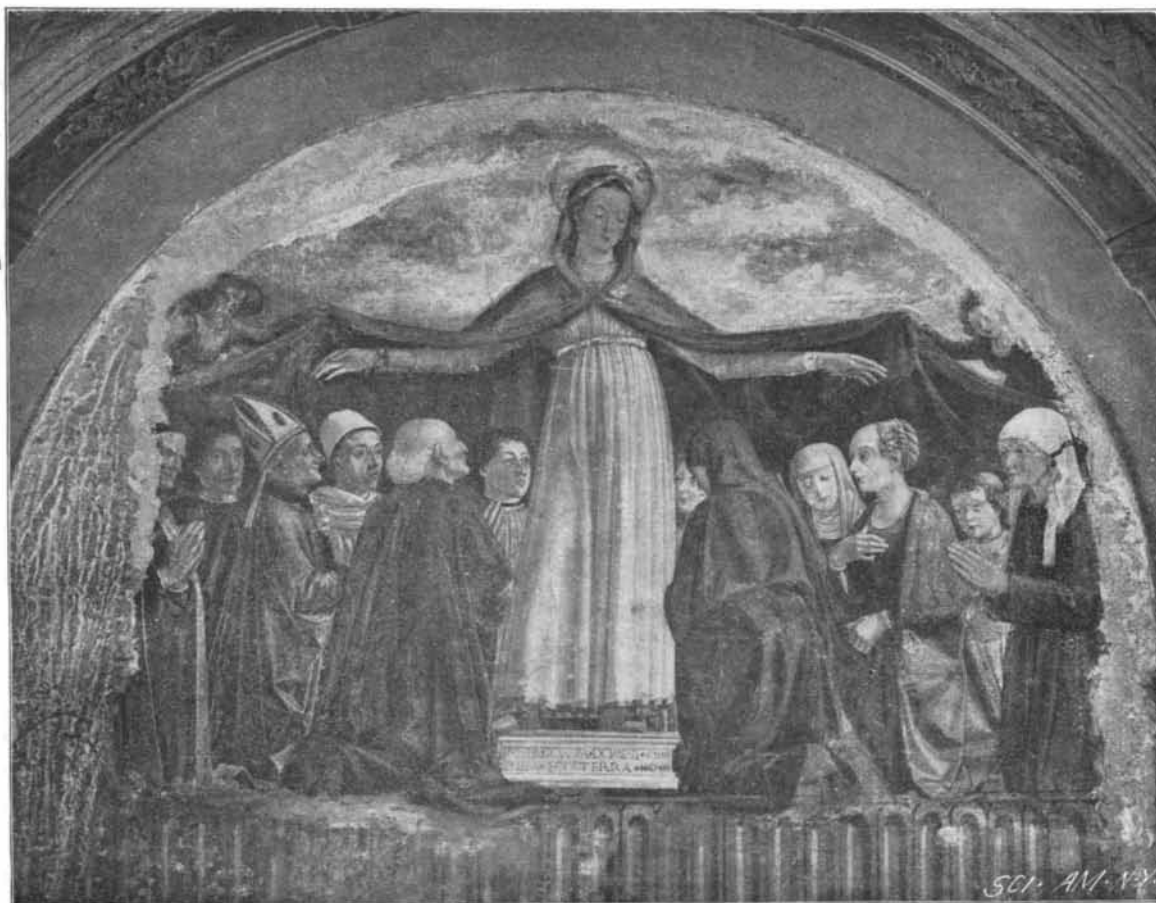
santi." This seems to show that Amerigo was a twin. It is generally believed that the fresco was painted about 1472, as it was known to be one of Ghirlandajo's early works. This would make Amerigo Vespucci about twenty years of age. His grandfather's tombstone was found a few years ago. It bears the date 1472, and the figure in the fresco is undoubtedly a portrait from life of his ancestor, so this would seem to bring the date of the fresco within very narrow limits, and as all the other men are older than Amerigo Vespucci, it is reasonable to suppose that the young man in the fresco is a true and authentic portrait of the navigator.

The fresco is well preserved, and to all appearances has never been retouched, and the artistic value of the discovery is very great, as it gives us an arch-authentic Ghirlandajo in a fine state of preservation.

Domenico di Tommaso di Currado Bigordi, called Ghirlandajo, was born in 1449 and died in 1494. He is important among the Florentines of the last quarter of the fifteenth century, on account of the human quality of his splendid portraits. Sobriety runs through all his work. There is no exaggerated movement, and the calm Florentine burghers sit quietly for their portraits. He was never so much at home as when painting assemblages of grave people, and he seizes the personality of his sitters and makes them live. The question of his contribution to the art of the Renaissance is well summed up in the Blashfield-Hopkins "Vasari," which says: "His grave and virile style becomes the link between Masaccio in the beginning and Raphael at the culmination of the art of painting. To the student of the Renaissance, of Florentine history, or of the 'human document,' Ghirlandajo's portraits of the contemporaries of the magnificent Lorenzo and of Savonarola are invaluable; the old town still lives in these frescoes, and though the master was not given 'the walls of Florence to paint,' as he desired, he portrayed the world within those walls."

The history of Amerigo Vespucci is well known. Born in 1451 at Florence, he died at Seville in 1512. He was a son of a notary of Florence and became a clerk in the commercial house of the Medici. He was sent to Spain by his employers about 1490, and some years after became a member of the commercial house at Seville which fitted out Columbus' second expedition. Amerigo Vespucci claimed to have accompanied four expeditions to the new world, concerning each of which he wrote a narrative.

The first expedition, in which he would appear to have held the position of astronomer, left Cadiz May 10 to 20, 1497, and after stopping at the Canary Islands came "at the end of twenty-seven days upon a coast which we thought to be that of a continent." If this expedition is authentic, Amerigo Vespucci reached the continent before either the Cabots or Columbus. He wrote an account of his various expeditions and also letters to Soderini, the Gonfaloniere of Florence. One of these letters was published in 1507 and Waldseemüller made use of this letter in the same year and was the first to suggest the name of "America." The sole authority for a voyage made by Vespucci in 1497 is the word of the navigator himself, and historians have proved that from the middle of May, 1497, to the end of May, 1498, Vespucci was busily engaged at Seville and San Lucar in the equipment of a fleet on which Columbus sailed on his third voyage. This seems to prove conclusively that Vespucci was not absent from Spain at the time the alleged voyage occurred. Contemporary history is silent regarding it.



THE RECENTLY DISCOVERED FRESCO OF THE VESPUCCI FAMILY.

beyond doubt. We know that Amerigo was born in 1452 (O. S.), for his certificate of baptism has just been discovered in the register of the church of San Giovanni. It reads: "*Lunedì a di 18 Mars 1452, Amerigho et Matteo, di Messere Nastagio, di Messere Amerigho Vespucci, popolo Se Lucia Ognissanti*." "Monday, March 18, 1452, Amerigo and Matteo, of M. Nastagio, of M. Amerigo Vespucci, parish of Santa Lucia, Ognis-

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